

Hoof Length and Trimming in the Peruvian Horse

By Mimi Busk-Downey

Advantage in the Show Ring?

A while ago there was a discussion of hoof length on a gaited horse training "chat list" on the internet. On that subject, a person who is not a Peruvian horse owner stated that even though Peruvian horses are shown barefoot, they believed the owners left the toes long in order to alter the gait. A number of experienced Peruvian breeders disputed the statement, citing that there was no advantage in doing so. Then a discussion on the rules of hoof length ensued. I wanted to find some evidence to prove or disprove that longer hoof length created an advantage to a Peruvian horse in the show ring. Since hooves are not measured in the US or Canada, I turned to Peru.

In the National Show in Peru, all of the horses that win a ribbon (1st - 6th) are measured in 22 different ways. Height, length of cannon bone, length of shoulder, length of head, hoof length and a myriad of other statistics are taken and published in the commemorative program that comes out right after the show, on the day of the exhibition of Champions. In April 2003 there were more than 550 horses shown, with 137 horses winning a 6th place or above. I went through the hoof length statistics on those horses and this is what I found:

Three had a hoof length of 4 1/4 inches. Eight had a hoof length of 3 7/8 inches. Fifty had a hoof length of 3 1/2 inches. Sixty-eight had hoof length of 3 1/4 inches. Eight had a hoof length of 2 3/4 inches. Of the three with the hooves over 4 inches in length, none placed higher than 4th.

Of the horses that won championships, all had the 3 1/4 or 3 1/2 inch measurement.

This gives evidence that a long hoof is not an advantage, not even in the toughest Peruvian Horse show ring in the world, the Peruvian National Show, with the largest classes of any show and a very high standard of quality. To me this illustrates that a "short, natural hoof" as stated in our rules is not only good for the horse, but good for the performance of the horse.

Hoof Length At Home and on the Trail

I believe many people still keep their horse's hooves, especially the horses at home that are not showing, longer than they should for the health of the horse. Long toes do considerable damage to the tendons and ligaments of the horse. The fact is that most people are concerned with getting more heel on their horse, but a number of studies of wild horses have shown that a low heel is natural to the horse. Those same studies have shown definitively that a long toe is NOT natural to the horse. A short toe will allow the horse freedom of movement on a healthy hoof, good heel pressure and proper breakover to avoid tendon problems. This is even more important on a horse that has considerable *termino* or lift.

When viewed from the bottom, the hoof should show a heel that is at the back, not underslung, and the frog should be 2/3 the length of the hoof. (Only 1/3 of the hoof should be in front of the frog – see photo 1.) If necessary, the toe can be nipped back and squared off a little to promote breakover. Notice that the hoof in photo 2 and 3 needs to be trimmed. The side view shows a broken angle and the bottom view shows two problems – the heel has become underslung so that weight bearing surface is not at the very back of the heel, and also the frog is only 1/2 the length of the foot, when it should be 2/3.

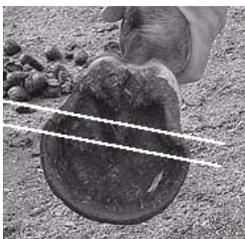


Photo 2 – Frog only half the length of hoof, and heel has become underslung, and is not supporting the back of foot (or the weight above it).

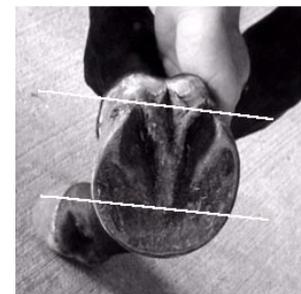


Photo 1 – Good frog, 2/3 the length of hoof, and heel is supporting at back of the foot.



Photo 3 – Left -- Same hoof as Photo 2, viewed from the side. This hoof needs to be trimmed. A noticeable broken angle has occurred due to the fact that most Peruvians grow toe more than heel, and there is a tendency to underslung heels.

Photo 4 – Right
This hoof shows the “Rule of Thumb” for angle, with the angle of the hoof matching the angle of the pastern. This is correct for most horses. (There is a slight flare on the hoof that could be removed but does not affect the way of going.)



The rule of thumb is that the angle of the hoof should match the angle of the pastern (see photo 4). This works with most horses, but the rule does not apply in every case. One year our stallion, RTP Casino, appeared footsore. We pulled him from the upcoming show and the vet examined him, noted that he has more upright pasterns than many Peruvians, and noticed that we had worked very hard to



Photo 5 – Left - Hoof balanced by x-rays with very slight broken angle, low heel and short toe. This is the same hoof as in Photo 1, showing ideal frog health and heel support.

get enough heel on him so that the angle of the hoof matched the angle of the pastern exactly. He recommended front shoes with pads. However, there was no improvement. The vet then suggested getting x-rays, and we feared the worst, founder. However, x-rays showed that the horse had not foundered --- his heel was just too high! The vet told us to lower the heel so the coffin bone would be level, and then snub the toe back and square it off. It would leave him with a slightly (very slightly) “broken angle” (see photo 5). It

was a less beautiful trim, but the horse was sound in three days, after having been sore for over a month! The horse has stayed completely sound on this low heel / short toe trim and won Champion of Champions Pleasure at several Regional Shows and performed 7 days of the Calgary Stampede, events requiring riding on gravel and pavement.

The “snubbing back” of the toe (shown in Photo 6) can greatly aid the horse in avoiding injury to tendons and ligaments by improving breakover. Your horses can enjoy a more efficient movement and more years of trouble-free riding by keeping heel pressure and a short, natural toe! Please note that some horses require trimming every month.

Using Shoes or Boots

There are occasions when the terrain requires shoes or boots. When choosing boots, there are reports that Renegades are easy to put on and stay on very well for natural-trim gaited horses. Many users report 300 miles on a set of boots.

When shoes are considered, the good breakover in the front hooves can be maintained. An easy way to do this is to use a shoe designed like these Natural Balance horse shoes pictured. They assist a healthy breakover. It is important that shoes be re-set every 6 – 8 weeks.

Happy trails!



Photo 6 – Snubbing the toe back creates a hoof much like a wild horse.



Natural Balance Shoes front and rear